

Head of UN climate body admits surprise at fury over blunder in report

One year on, Rajendra Pachauri speaks of regret at false assertion that Himalayan glaciers would disappear by 2035

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Suzanne Goldenberg, US environment correspondent
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Rajendra Pachauri, chairman of the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change: 'I had absolutely no idea what was coming'. Photograph: Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

The head of the UN climate science body has admitted he was taken entirely by surprise by the ferocious public reaction to a [blunder in its report on Himalayan glaciers](#). But he insisted the controversy had not set back efforts to secure action on [climate change](#).

The mistake, a false assertion that the Himalayan glaciers would disappear by 2035, exacted severe damage to the reputation of the IPCC and its head, [Rajendra Pachauri](#). It also provided further fuel to the controversy over the [emails stolen from East Anglia's climate research unit](#) and released online a year ago today.

Pachauri said he had not predicted the storm of criticism. "I had absolutely no idea what was coming. It just sort of escalated," [Pachauri told the Guardian at a climate meeting](#) sponsored by California's governor, [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#).

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Pachauri initially dismissed the first challenge to the accuracy of the 2007 report on melting of the Himalayas as "voodoo science". It took two months for the IPCC to acknowledge that the assertion on glaciers was based on flimsy data – a quote given to journalists – and should never have made it into the report.

"In retrospect we should have had a much better capacity at the IPCC to deal with this kind of thing," Pachauri said this week.

But Pachauri said the mistake and subsequent public doubts about climate science could not be blamed for the failure of international negotiations to reach agreement on a climate treaty in Copenhagen last December.

"In anything as comprehensive and complicated as climate change you can't expect a smooth run all the way through. There will be ups and downs, there will be changes in public perception," he said. "You are also dealing with other factors such as unemployment, the economic downturn."

Despite Pachauri's protestations, the scientific controversies were widely seen as a factor in the defeat of climate legislation in Congress. By the time of the mid-term elections, climate scepticism was viewed as [practically an article of faith among conservative Republicans](#).

"Last year we had a tremendous setback because some of the science and some of the numbers were manipulated and that is very damaging because it gives the other side a way in," Schwarzenegger told his summit this week.

Pachauri too suffered damage to his reputation, and faced calls to give up his leadership of the IPCC. However, he won an [apology from the Sunday Telegraph](#) for a false report on his business connections.

He also shook off calls for his resignation, and said this week he would stand on as IPCC chief until his term ends in 2014. The science body would be extra vigilant to prevent a repeat of the blunder as it prepares the next report, he said. "We just have to make sure that to the extent humanly possible we don't commit any errors."

The IPCC was already working to restore confidence in its report by issuing new guidelines for how to express uncertainty in scientific reports.

But he said the existing IPCC procedures were already stringent enough to catch future mistakes. He also defended the use of reports by advocacy organisations and official agencies, especially in developing countries which may not have funding for scientific expeditions.

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